

The Rise and Spread of Buddhism in Gujarat: A Historical Study

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Abstract—This historical study examines the rise, expansion, and eventual decline of Buddhism in Gujarat from the 3rd century BCE to the 13th century CE. Drawing upon archaeological reports, epigraphic evidence, and contemporary travel accounts, the paper traces the earliest Buddhist presence in Gujarat through the Ashokan rock edicts at Girnar (Junagadh). It then analyzes the significant growth of Buddhist monastic centers during the Maitraka dynasty (5th–8th century CE), particularly the renowned university at Vallabhi, which attracted scholars from across Asia. The study also highlights the role of Gujarat's maritime trade networks, including ports such as Bharuch and Cambay, in facilitating the spread of Buddhist ideas to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. Archaeological sites, including Devnimori, Vadnagar, Talaja, and Khambhalida are examined as evidence of a flourishing Buddhist landscape. Finally, the paper explores the complex factors behind Buddhism's decline in Gujarat, including shifting political patronage, competition from Brahmanical and Jain traditions, and changing trade routes. The study argues that Gujarat constituted a distinctive and historically significant Buddhist region beyond the Gangetic heartland, deserving greater attention in mainstream Buddhist historiography.

Index Terms - Buddhism, Gujarat, Monastic centers, Maritime trade, Vallabhi

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of Buddhism in Gujarat holds significant importance for understanding the religion's expansion beyond its Gangetic heartland. Gujarat, with its strategic location along western maritime trade routes and its long coastline, served as a crucial conduit for Buddhist monks, merchants, and pilgrims traveling to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and beyond. Moreover, the region's unique political landscape most notably the Maitraka dynasty's sustained patronage produced a distinctive Buddhist culture centered at Vallabhi,

which rivaled Nalanda in its curriculum of Hinayana and secular studies. Despite its historical significance, the existing historiography on Buddhism in Gujarat remains fragmented and inadequate. Most scholarly works have focused on the better-documented Buddhist sites of eastern India, while Western Indian Buddhism has received comparatively less attention. Where Gujarat is mentioned, studies tend to emphasize either isolated archaeological discoveries such as the Devnimori stupa or the travelogues of Chinese pilgrims like Xuanzang, without offering a synthetic historical narrative. A critical gap also exists in explaining the region-specific factors behind Buddhism's decline in Gujarat, which differed from patterns observed in other parts of India. This study therefore poses the following research questions: When and how did Buddhism first appear in Gujarat? What political, economic, and social factors facilitated its expansion? Why did Buddhism eventually decline, and how did this process differ from neighboring regions? The central thesis is that Gujarat developed a distinctive and resilient Buddhist tradition shaped by maritime commerce and royal patronage, which persisted for over a millennium before gradually assimilating into local Hindu and Jain practices.

II. EARLY EVIDENCE OF BUDDHISM IN GUJARAT

The earliest tangible evidence of Buddhism in Gujarat dates to the reign of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE). Among the most significant markers is the set of rock edicts inscribed at Girnar, near present-day Junagadh. These edicts, carved on a massive granite boulder, represent the westernmost surviving Ashokan inscriptions in India. The Girnar edicts specifically the Major Rock Edicts I to XIV promote the principles of dhamma, non-violence, respect for all living beings, and religious tolerance.

While Ashoka himself was a devout Buddhist, his edicts were addressed to a diverse populace; nevertheless, their presence in the Saurashtra peninsula indicates that Buddhist ideology had gained imperial sanction in the region as early as the 3rd century BCE. The Girnar rock also contains later Sanskrit inscriptions from the Śaka and Gupta periods, but the Ashokan layer remains foundational for Buddhist historiography in Gujarat. Beyond inscriptions, early Buddhist material culture in Gujarat from this period is relatively sparse but not absent. The earliest cave complexes rudimentary shelters for wandering monks appeared in the hilly tracts of Saurashtra and Kutch. Sites such as Uparkot caves (Junagadh) and Bava Pyara caves (also Junagadh) contain simple viharas and chaitya halls dating roughly from the 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE. These caves lack the elaborate ornamentation of later rock-cut architecture but demonstrate an established monastic presence. Scholars have noted that the layout of these early caves small, functional cells around a central courtyard closely resembles the early Buddhist cave patterns of the Deccan (e.g., Bhaja and Kondane). This architectural similarity suggests that Buddhist monks migrating from the western Deccan or Konkan region introduced cave-digging traditions into Gujarat. Stupas from this early phase are even rarer. No freestanding stupas from the pre-Maitraka period have survived intact, although scattered relic caskets and structural remains at sites like Intwa (near Dholka) hint at stupa worship. The paucity of early Buddhist architecture does not necessarily imply low religious activity; rather, perishable materials (wood, brick) were likely used, and subsequent rebuilding or destruction has obscured the archaeological record. Nevertheless, the combination of Ashokan edicts and humble cave dwellings firmly establishes that Buddhism had taken root in Gujarat by the late centuries BCE, albeit as a marginal presence relative to the Gangetic plains.

III. GROWTH UNDER THE MAITRAKA DYNASTY

The true florescence of Buddhism in Gujarat occurred under the Maitraka dynasty (475–776 CE), who ruled from their capital at Vallabhi (modern Vala, in Saurashtra). The Maitrakas, originally feudatories of

the Gupta Empire, established an independent kingdom that prospered through maritime trade and agricultural wealth. Unlike many contemporary dynasties that favored Brahmanical religions, the Maitrakas were notable patrons of Buddhism, particularly the Mahayana tradition, while also tolerating Jainism and Hinduism. The crown jewel of Buddhist Gujarat under the Maitrakas was Vallabhi University. Although no substantial ruins survive today (the site awaits large-scale excavation), textual sources most famously the account of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang), who visited in the 640s CE describe Vallabhi as a great center of Buddhist learning. Xuanzang recorded over 100 monasteries (viharas) and roughly 6,000 to 10,000 monks residing at Vallabhi. The curriculum emphasized the Sarvastivada and Sammitiya schools of Hinayana Buddhism, but also included secular subjects: grammar, logic, medicine, law, and political science (arthashastra). This combination of religious and practical education made Vallabhi unique among Indian Buddhist universities; while Nalanda focused overwhelmingly on Mahayana philosophy, Vallabhi produced administrators and diplomats for the Maitraka court and beyond. The university attracted students from China, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia. Another Chinese pilgrim, Yijing (I-Tsing), who traveled in the late 7th century, praised Vallabhi and Nalanda as the two most prestigious Buddhist institutions in India.

Royal patronage extended beyond Vallabhi. Maitraka kings especially Dhruvasena I (525–545 CE) and Shiladitya I (580–615 CE) endowed numerous monasteries, donated land grants recorded on copper plates, and sponsored the construction of stupas. The Maitraka copper plate inscriptions (e.g., the Bhadra inscription) frequently mention the donation of villages to Buddhist monks (bhikshus) residing in viharas. This pattern of royal grants provided economic security to monastic communities, allowing them to focus on study, meditation, and teaching. In return, the monks legitimized Maitraka rule through rituals and served as advisors. The symbiotic relationship between the throne and the sangha fueled the expansion of Buddhism across Saurashtra and into mainland Gujarat.

IV. MARITIME TRADE AND THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Gujarat's long coastline and position on Indian Ocean trade routes made it a natural hub for maritime commerce. Ancient ports such as Bharuch (Greek: Barygaza), Sopara (Suppara, near present-day Mumbai, historically part of northern Konkan but often linked to Gujarat's trade network), Cambay (Khambhat), and Valabhi's own port facilities facilitated the exchange of textiles, spices, gemstones, and pearls. Buddhism, which had historically traveled along trade routes, found in Gujarat a launching point for overseas transmission. From the early centuries CE, Buddhist merchants and monks joined ships sailing from Gujarat to the prosperous kingdoms of Sri Lanka (Anuradhapura), Southeast Asia (Pyu city-states in Burma, Dvaravati in Thailand, and Srivijaya in Sumatra). The literary tradition of Sri Lanka, particularly the Mahavamsa, mentions that monks from western India including Gujarat participated in the consecration of the Mahathupa (Great Stupa) at Anuradhapura in the 2nd century BCE. More concretely, archaeological finds from southern Thailand and the Malay peninsula contain votive tablets and inscriptions in Western Indian scripts (5th–7th centuries CE), suggesting the presence of Gujarati Buddhist pilgrims or settlers.

The connection ran both ways. Sophisticated Buddhist art forms such as the slender, elegantly draped Buddha images of the Gupta-Vallabhi style influenced the earliest Buddha statues in Sri Lanka and Java. Conversely, Gujarati monks returning from Southeast Asia brought back new texts and ritual objects, enriching local Buddhism. The port of Sopara, just south of the Gulf of Khambhat, was particularly renowned: a relic casket of the Buddha was discovered there in the 19th century, inscribed with characters indicating donations by merchants. Sopara also is mentioned in the Jataka tales as a departure point for overseas voyages, underlining its long association with Buddhist maritime activity. Maritime trade not only spread Buddhism outward but also sustained it within Gujarat. The wealth generated from customs duties and merchant endowments financed the construction of monasteries and stupas. Merchant guilds (shrenis) frequently donated to Buddhist institutions, as evidenced by inscriptions at Devnimori and Vadnagar. Thus, the economic and religious

spheres were deeply intertwined: the rise of Buddhism in Gujarat cannot be separated from the rise of its seaborne commerce.

V. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

The material record of Gujarat's Buddhist past has grown substantially through archaeological excavations over the past century. Five key sites merit detailed discussion. Devnimori (in Sabarkantha district, northern Gujarat) is arguably the most spectacular Buddhist discovery in the state. Excavated in the 1960s by the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Devnimori revealed a large mahastupa built on a cruciform plan, surrounded by hundreds of small votive stupas. Inside the stupa's relic chamber, archaeologists found a crystal casket containing a silver casket, which held gold leaves and a small pearl presumably representing the Buddha's corporeal remains (dhatu). The relic chamber also produced an impressive cache of Buddhist bronzes, terracotta plaques depicting the Buddha's life, and coins of the Maitraka king Dharasena I (6th–7th century CE). Devnimori's scale and richness suggest it was a major pilgrimage center. Vadnagar (Mehsana district) has recently gained prominence due to ongoing excavations by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Vadnagar was a flourishing town from the 1st century BCE to the 12th century CE, and the ASI has uncovered a large brick monastery (vihara) with cells arranged around a courtyard, along with a complex water management system. The monastery produced seals inscribed with Buddhist monastic names and figurines of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Coins and pottery confirm continuous occupation from the Indo-Greek to the Solanki period, making Vadnagar a unique multilayered Buddhist site.

Talaja and Khambhalida (both in Saurashtra) represent rock-cut cave complexes. Talaja, near Bhavnagar, contains over 20 caves ranging from simple cells to a large chaitya hall. The style of the pillars and chaitya window (chaitya-mukha) places Talaja in the 4th to 5th centuries CE, i.e., immediately before the Maitraka peak. Khambhalida, in Rajkot district, features three caves: one chaitya and two viharas. The façade of the chaitya houses two large reliefs of Bodhisattvas (Padmapani and Vajrapani), indicating Mahayana influence. Both Talaja and Khambhalida were likely

located along ancient trade routes connecting inland Saurashtra to coastal ports. The Junagadh caves including the Khapra Kodia and Uparkot caves are sometimes overlooked but contain important inscriptions. One inscription in the Uparkot caves, written in Brahmi script, records the gift of a cave by a Saka ruler named Rudradaman's minister (2nd century CE). This demonstrates that non-Buddhist rulers also patronized Buddhist monks, a theme relevant to understanding the religion's resilience. Epigraphically, Gujarat has yielded over three dozen Buddhist-related inscriptions, mostly on copper plates and stone slabs. The Devnimori scroll inscription (written on a birch-bark manuscript) contains a Buddhist creed (*ye dharma hetu*), a formula ubiquitous across Buddhist Asia. The Maitraka copper plates (e.g., the Palitana plates, the Kheda plates) record land grants to Buddhist viharas, listing monks by name and specifying the boundaries of donated villages. These documents are invaluable for reconstructing the social and economic networks of the sangha. By the 10th century, Buddhism in Gujarat had entered a slow but irreversible decline. The process was not sudden or violent unlike in some parts of Central Asia but gradual, involving absorption and transformation. Several interrelated factors contributed. Competition with Brahmanical sects. Under the Solanki dynasty (10th–13th centuries), Gujarat witnessed a resurgence of Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The Solankis, though nominally tolerant, lavishly patronized Hindu temples the sun temple at Modhera, the Rudra Mahalaya at Siddhapur, and countless Shaivite shrines. This shift in royal and elite patronage meant that Buddhist monasteries lost their primary source of funding. Moreover, charismatic Hindu saints and philosophers (e.g., Hemachandra, a Jain; but also Shaivite gurus) won popular devotion away from the sangha. Buddhist monastic discipline, which emphasized celibacy and renunciation, seemed increasingly out of step with the householder-centered bhakti movements.

From the 9th century onward, the Silk Road overland routes and a shift in Indian Ocean shipping patterns diminished the prosperity of Gujarat's traditional ports. The rise of the Chola navy (based farther south) and later the Turkish incursions into north India disrupted the commercial networks that had sustained Buddhist monasteries. Since many viharas depended on mercantile endowments, the drying-up of merchant donations led to economic contraction. Monasteries

that could not pay for repairs fell into ruin, and monks migrated to safer or more prosperous regions (e.g., Nepal, Tibet). A distinctive feature of Buddhism's end in Gujarat was its gradual merging with Jainism and orthodox Hinduism. Theosophically, both Jainism and Buddhism shared concepts of karma, rebirth, and non-violence, making boundaries permeable. Jain monks often occupied abandoned Buddhist viharas, rededicating them to their own Tirthankaras. Many Buddhist deities especially Avalokiteshvara and Tara were assimilated into the Hindu pantheon as forms of Shiva or Devi. By the 13th century, the few remaining Buddhist communities either converted to Jainism or were absorbed into the Nathapanthi (Kanphata) yogi traditions, which adopted some Buddhist tantric practices while rejecting formal Buddhist ordination. The famous Dilwara temples at Mount Abu, though Jain, were built by former Buddhist craftsmen, and their iconography betrays a stark Buddhist influence. By the time the Turkish conquerors under Alauddin Khalji invaded Gujarat in the late 13th century, Buddhism had already ceased to exist as an organized religion in the region. The invaders demolished some Jain and Hindu temples, but there were virtually no Buddhist monasteries left to destroy. This contrasts with Bihar and Bengal, where the Nalanda and Vikramshila universities were sacked in 1193. Gujarat's Buddhism faded more quietly, through assimilation and economic neglect rather than militant persecution.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has traced the trajectory of Buddhism in Gujarat from its Ashokan origins to its gradual decline by the 13th century. Key findings include the foundational role of the Girnar edicts, the unprecedented florescence under Maitraka patronage centered at Vallabhi University, the critical importance of maritime trade networks spreading Buddhism overseas, and a decline driven not by violence but by economic shifts, Brahmanical competition, and absorption into Jain and Hindu traditions. These findings challenge the conventional focus on the Gangetic plains as the sole heartland of Indian Buddhism. Gujarat demonstrates a distinctive Buddhist tradition shaped by commerce, secular education, and coastal connectivity that persisted for over a millennium and profoundly influenced Sri

Lanka and Southeast Asia. Future research should prioritize full excavation of Vallabhi, systematic survey of Saurashtra's cave sites, and comparative studies of Buddhist decline in Gujarat versus eastern India. Such work will further illuminate the regional diversity of Indian Buddhism.

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